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Published in:

Digital Voices: A Collaborative Exploration of the Recorded Voice in Post-Compulsory Education

Publication date:

2013

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in ResearchOnline](#)

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Shapiro, A & Johnston, A 2013, Towards vidcasts: a case study in the development and use of video podcasts. in A Middleton (ed.), *Digital Voices: A Collaborative Exploration of the Recorded Voice in Post-Compulsory Education*. Media-Enhanced Learning Special Interest Group and Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, pp. 144-148.

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Towards vidcasts — a case study in the development and use video podcasts

Angela Shapiro and Aidan Johnston

Context

This case study presents the learning journey towards the development of vidcasts at Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU). This was undertaken by the Effective Learning Service (ELS) and the Spoken Word Team at GCU.

ELS was established in 2001 as a service that is available to all students irrespective of level, background or programme. It is currently located within the Learner Support Department together with other centralised services including Spoken Word, Careers, the Library, and Disability Services. The ELS has developed extensive, collaborative partnerships across schools, in the planning and delivery of context based workshops.

Spoken Word Services originated in the international Spoken Word project, which aimed to transform higher education through the integration of digitised audio into learning and teaching. A collaboration and legal deposit agreement with BBC Information & Archives allows Spoken Word to make use of audio and video programmes from the BBC's extensive archive for teaching and learning purposes. At GCU it is responsible for providing tools and technologies, coping with intellectual property rights, supplying engaging and valuable content, and encouraging reflection on the learning and teaching process. The team recognises that teachers need to develop 'pedagogical pluralism' and, in this context, aims to encourage students and their teachers to "write on and for the internet" (Wallace and Donald, 2008). Spoken Word has extensive experience in producing podcasts and exciting interactive material collaboratively. Working with the REAP Project (Re-Engineering Assessment Practices), Spoken Word has applied video podcasts as a driver for change, replacing a one hour weekly lecture with a 15 minute video podcast designed around a blend of a lecturer's narration, BBC audio and video clips, and related to the lecturer's own PowerPoint slides (REAP Pilot Projects, 2007).

Case study background

This case study describes how a vidcast methodology (sometimes known as a vodcast or videocast) was developed. Traxler (2008) describes vidcasts as media that contain audio and images, either moving or fixed.

The impetus for and subsequent shape of the project was research undertaken by the ELS which stemmed from an evaluation of the workshop approach used by ELS. In 2008, the ELS team designed a survey questionnaire which was distributed to a purposive sample of 300 students attending a range of context-based workshops. The questionnaires were completed by undergraduate and postgraduate students and reflected a range of subject disciplines, course work and exam requirements (McAllister and Shapiro, 2009). Students were asked about overall relevance of the session. The majority of responses rated the workshops high/very relevant. Similarly, they responded that workshop materials rated highly for their preparation in undertaking specific assignments.

Nevertheless, it is impractical for every student to attend the workshops or meet with ELS staff face to face. Many students access the ELS materials online where they can spend a significant time consulting them (Table 1). Moreover, many students commented that they would also have liked to have had the opportunity to access workshop material again at a later date (*ibid*).

Table 1 Academic Year 2007-2008 Effective Learning Use

No of students attending appointments	Number of individual appointments – face to face	Percentage of Individual appointments on line	No of Workshops	Recorded Use of Support Guides on ELS web site
900	1,600	40.2%	182	4,595

It was logical for ELS to work in partnership with Spoken Word to address this finding. The collaboration commenced in 2007 to produce a vidcast to support students' learning. The need for such an approach was reinforced by awareness of the needs of a large number of mature students at GCU who have stated on several occasions a preference to view materials on line.

The partnership wanted to encourage students to continue take a self-directed approach to learning by referring them back to the ELS website. An auditory approach supported by visual content was selected with the intention of bringing the workshop into the learner's individual learning space, thus accommodating students' self-directed learning styles (Fox and Ronkowski, 1997). The team also drew on academic literacies theory and practice, taking account of the '...broader and more socially [derived] uses and meanings of literacy' in the context of HE study (Leung and Safford, 2005, p.320).

As a result, students are able to choose when and where they engage with the vidcasts and are able to revisit the materials at their own pace (Gribbins, 2007).

Developmental issues and challenges

Whilst it was not feasible to repeat workshops, the team wanted to try to replicate the experience emphasising the oral voice. They also wanted to give students choices

for how and when they accessed the material i.e. on a computer or on the students' own mobile devices.

Vidcast production

In the initial stages of developing the vidcast, the lecturer was videoed delivering a workshop on essay writing to students. However, once the video recorded output was viewed, it was felt that the lecturer's presence detracted from the recording, rather than adding to its pedagogical value (Figure 1).

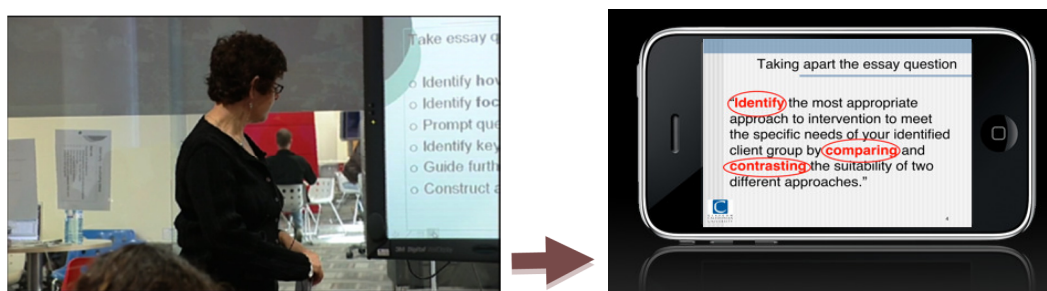


Figure 1 Lecturer delivering workshop compared to the information displayed more simply on a mobile device

It was also apparent that additional features appeared which were not anticipated, such as the visibility of students working outside the room. This meant too many non-essential visual cues were appearing at the same time. Furthermore, it was felt that the lecturer's presence on film would limit the 'shelf-life' of the resource.

Other problems arose. For example, the questions from the audience during the workshop were not clearly audible on the recording. It also proved difficult to match the spoken voice to the pertinent sections of the recording as no prepared script had been drawn up. This meant that at times there was either too much or insufficient oral content.

In light of these issues the decision was taken to design and produce a 20 minute vidcast that would use the PowerPoint slides from the essay writing workshop with oral voice and links to the ELS website (Figure 1). This was informed by the work of Lee and Chan (2007) who highlighted how the use of *iPods* by mobile learners allows them to access information at self-determined times. This decision was further influenced by the flexibility of the medium in meeting a diverse range of learning needs. Podcasting appeals to auditory learners and the addition of visual prompts means that the vidcast is also able to support dyslexic students (Edirisingha *et al.*, 2008). Students with visual impairments on the other hand are able to learn from listening to the vidcast's audio element. The ability for the download of the material on to their mobile device further enhances accessibility.

The PowerPoint slides were supported by further links to specific areas of the ELS website where additional information could be found. Two formats were used: one for online access embedded within a webpage using a Flash-based video player and the other for students who prefer to download the material for use with their *iPod* or other mobile video device.

User evaluation of the vidcasts

Views from a small number of students were sought using a focus group approach. Students with diverse learning needs (dyslexia and English as a second language), coming from a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and levels were purposively sampled. The views of one member of ELS lecturing staff were also sought. Respondents were also asked to complete a questionnaire.

Forty-five academic staff representing learning and academic development units from all Scottish Universities also gave useful and critical insight on the vidcast approach during a critical discussion with a wider audience of informed practitioners at the biannual Educational Learning Advisors Scotland (ELAS) Forum (Shapiro and Johnston, 2008).

The feedback indicated that the users enjoyed having the option of viewing and listening to the vidcast and that the vidcast language and content was useful. However, some also commented that the vidcasts could be improved by reducing the amount of information for use on the mobile devices, that shorter sections would be preferable and that ways needed to be found to aid navigation through the materials for users who only wanted to view sections of it. Users of *iPods* and other devices without connections to the web were potentially disadvantaged and did not want web links displayed on their materials. Even when students downloaded the material onto their *iPods*, they still preferred to access university course material when they were in their 'studying zone' rather than accessing the material 'on the move'. In short the majority liked using *iPods* for an overview, but preferred to download the materials onto a PC.

Conclusion

The feedback has subsequently prompted several changes. Chapter marks were added to aid navigation and the links to the ELS website were omitted from the versions for *iPod* download. The vidcast can be fast-forwarded and the user can also select to watch the vidcast with or without sound. Further evaluations and refinements are underway.

Whilst PowerPoint can give part of the story, the addition of the spoken word is a powerful tool in delivering workshops as vidcasts.

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